

LTBC in 2004

What transpires at a typical meeting of the Last Thursday Book Club? The host has chosen a book which has been read and now the discussion proceeds. The following provides exemplary report of six months of meetings during our 11th year.

Benjamin Franklin – an American Life by Walter Isaacson

July 2004

While today's DNC caucused in Boston, the thirteen (some original) colonists congressed at the home of **Don Benoist**, where they partook of political skewering and praising of a true founding father and grandfather. Walter Isaacson (b. May 20, 1952) tells us there are Franklin-lovers and Franklin-haters, and we learned from some of both. We learned that Franklin [BF] retired at age 42, on page 137 at exactly the half-way point of his life, all on a 2-year education. We also learned that Isaacson himself squandered a good Pembroke College/Oxford (1976) education by accepting employment by both *Time* and CNN. His journalistic style was both appreciated and deplored.

Something for everyone. Would it have hurt to have some poetic language ... and a few metrics? How many letters did Franklin write – half as many as Jefferson is famous for, or twice as many? Should there not have been more humor? That bit about BF "almost" coming up with the size/concept of a molecule, that was a joke, right? Did Franklin (or Mmse. Brillion) invent the lap-dance?

Should a biography stick purely to the subject, or should it provide the reader with descriptions of the environment, give the context in which the subject operates?

Isaacson gave us a few teasers, reminding us that at this time, London was the 2nd largest city in the world, yet with population less than 1 million. Philadelphia had 7,000 people when BF arrived in 1723, although it was growing at 20% per year. And on the cover of 18th Century's People Magazine? Men like Franklin, Lafayette, John Paul Jones – there were no professional athletic teams, no rappers, few actors, no rock stars! No NASCAR! However, our own Ben [Smith] reminds us that there were some leisure activities in the late 18th Century:

In addition to fornication and such, there were spectator sports such as horse racing, boxing, tennis and bowls. Also there were playhouses (remember Shakespeare). Gambling was quite popular. There were some diversions even for geniuses. Franklin was rumored to be a member of the Hellfire club. Might have been better than late night TV.

Men of note were often representative of the Enlightenment, and true Renaissance men. One could hang a thermometer over the side of the cruise ship and discover the Gulf Stream. What a era of opportunity!

The world was indeed a wonderful oyster for humans to open – the vast unexplored continents of North America, Africa, Australia. Letter writing was an accomplished art – consider BF and Jefferson. BF enjoyed his experiments with electricity, but it had not been twisted into the extreme

perversions – there were no e-lectric chairs, no e-mail, no E-Bay, no TIVO. The entire 17th century was pre-train, so horseback still represented the standard for speed of travel and communications in general. For Philosophy, we had Voltaire. For music, we had Mozart (not mentioned in the book, but as we learned with previous LTBC selection, born: Salzburg, 1756, died prior to end of century), followed closely by Bach and Beethoven. BF met and interacted with the author of *The Marriage of Figaro*. In the military, men could still be national heroes, they weren't trying for that [3rd Purple Heart](#) and a trip home - raw animal courage could make a difference – consider John Paul Jones, and before the century was out, by the time of the rise of Napoleon, Horatio Nelson.

Life was far from perfect – it still included terror and terrorism, in the forms of Indians and anti-Indians, superstitions and unfounded fears, slaves and anti-slaves. ... so ... what did you think of the book?

Ben: a readable history, an interesting character. I liked BF, I liked the book. **A**

Ken: I enjoyed the book and learned quite a bit. I particularly liked the 17 page "Conclusions" section that showed how views of Franklin's accomplishments shifted back and forth with time over the past 200 years. Franklin clearly enjoyed his press clippings and celebrity, ironic considering one of his famous quotes that said "People who are wrapped up in themselves make small packages." I found it interesting that Isaacson seemed to belittle John Adams's diplomatic contributions in France compared to Franklin's. However, according to David McCullough in his recent book on John Adams (p. 267), Adams advised the French that "nothing would so guarantee a "speedy conclusion" to the war as a powerful French fleet in American waters." The sensational American victory at Yorktown occurred when the French eventually followed Adams's advice. Overall, I enjoyed McCullough's book on Adams somewhat better than Isaacson's book on Franklin (By the way, tourism went way up in the John Adams area of Mass. after McCullough's book became a best seller). **A-**

Gary: I did not like the beginning, but found that it laid the foundation for the last half of the book. Note: The "Conference House" referred to in the book, on Staten Island, is only three miles from where I grew up. **A-**

Tom: I liked the writing, and learned a lot. Isaacson says the world is divided into Franklin-lovers and Franklin-haters. I'm a hater. The man was personally not that appealing to me; I didn't care for his social philosophy. What was he doing flirting with those little girls, for Lolita's sake? Don't ever compare this man's genius to that of Isaac Newton - Newton invented the Calculus, for Leibnitz' sake! To use a baseball analogy, Franklin was a lifetime .300 hitter who never would have made it into the Hall of Fame on the first ballot. **B+**

Mike: Isaacson's rendition is somewhere in between a scholarly work and a folksy story-telling of the life of BF. Perhaps the best description of BF was by his 14 yr old grandson Benny:

"Very different from other old persons, for they are fretful and complaining and dissatisfied, and my grandpapa is laughing and cheerful like a young person."

It took me a while to realize that his yearly sections were not necessarily unique – some of them overlapped the years – and I liked the sub-titles within the chapters, but I often felt that the book was a modern chugging version of BF's life – start and stop, back and fill – rather than a smooth path pressing toward clear pragmatic goals, which BF must have felt he was living. Franklin gets an A A RP, Isaacson gets a **B**.

Rob: The book exceeded my expectations - today you might hear quoted Jefferson or Adams, but seldom Franklin. But I came away impressed with the man. He was negotiating serious policy with France and England while he was flirting with the ladies - the man was excellent at multi-tasking. I think he would have been a first-time ballot winner for Hall of Fame Scientist, Politician, Statesman. The way Isaacson's book was chunked allowed me to read a little, sleep, read some more. **A-**

Keith: 500 pages exceeded my capacity, so I read another BF biography (*by Edmund S. Morgan, c. 2003*). There are different types of genius, and Franklin was broad, not deep. Genius comes in many forms. His life was a dazzling dichotomy - he spent 1/3 of his life overseas, yet he is considered the prototypical American. The dichotomy was from hubris to humility; from myopia to visionary. **B**

Chuck: I *did* read the book. I found Franklin to be a very complex character. He was 84 years old at the end of his life, and he had changed his personality several times by then. In many places, Isaacson's work was superficial. **B**

Charlie: I would give BF an A, and the book a **B+** for many of the reasons previously stated. The facts were there, the author was uncritical of Franklin's foibles. He didn't point out Franklin's problems, he remained distant.

Bill: I really liked the *Autobiography* - as you might suppose, there he doesn't say much bad about himself. He was my hero - may not have been telling all the truth, but he made me appreciate his cleverness. Part 1 (of Isaacson's book) was the *Autobiography*. If I knew I could give a grade without reading the book, I would have stayed with that. The last part was good! But not finding my hero in the book, I have to give it a **C**.

Jack: I read the *Autobiography* 40 years ago - so this was a good way to learn more, perhaps the truth, about Franklin. He was not particularly a likeable character, but a fascinating one. **A-**

Joel: Fascinating. My previous knowledge of Franklin turned out to be very limited. BF was an amateur scientist, like the section in *Scientific American*, where home-brew experiments are described. He didn't know, he hoped he was making

progress. The book itself was relatively superficial. **A-**

Don: I didn't know what to expect when I started reading the book. The BF we learned about in grade school wasn't who the man was - he had much more range. He excelled in so many fields. I was very pleased to learn more about him in the book, and from everyone's discussion here tonight, with many ideas coming into play. **A-**

Reading Lolita in Tehran by Azar Nafisi
(special treat: tour of the Triple R Museum)

August 2004

With the recitation of the *Qu'ran* chanted in the background, the seven pagan sons and three true apostles of the Prophet wrenched their way through revolution and demagoguery in the Smithsonian-featured confines of the Triple R Museum. The Rs, Richard Rinehart and Rob, toured the new converts through floors of 19th century tools, early 20th Century toys and obscure novels, late 20th Nautilus equipment, and 1920s Ford trucks and Studebaker, with a '62 Impala convertible thrown in for nostalgia. A 10,000 lb 1895 steam engine tractor was discovered which apparently had been recently used to crush several Dixie Chicks. Or perhaps their CDs.

We learned that Azar Nafisi was born in Iran around 1954 and while her father was mayor of Tehran, was sent to study in England at age 13. She returned to Iran at age 17 as her father was imprisoned by the Shah, and experienced much of the revolution which deposed the Shah in 1979, as well as the return of the Ayatollah Khomeini and the subsequent 8 years war with Iraq (1980-1988).

The group had much heated discussion, some of which was actually centered on the book.

Chuck: When I started reading the book, I liked it very much - the *Gatsby* section, and *Lolita* was also well suited. That's the last I liked the book. The author insisted on forcing connections to novels (I won't say obscure again) and brought me to where I didn't like it. **B-**

Don: I was a little upset through the *Lolita* part - I thought I would get dead tired of all these women's meetings going on - however, as I got deeper into the book, I appreciated the insight on how women are treated under Islam. I was informed of how the movement was allowed to grow as different groups came together. It was enlightening and I began to accept the author's long dissertations on how she reacted to the influence of the state. I give it an **A-**

Tom: I liked it as an informative memoir. I learned what life was like under the Islamic Republic, but the book became repetitive as it went over the same ground while blending the lessons of literature into life. The author had a formula and insisted on following it through the book. **B**

Ben: I liked it pretty well - an innovative device that worked very well. The part about

James was appropriately ambiguous. Coming from a family of all females (except me), I could sympathize with the ladies. I'd give it a **B+**

Charlie: It was good as an informative memoir. Also as a personal look at relationships. Too literary for me, twice as long as it should be: **B-**

Rob: (from *NY Times* Yardley review: "The book is in the first 80 pages: satisfying yet disorganized."). The influence of the book was not just with Nafisi as a teacher but the insight by her students. Very good in the first two parts, then the book got away from the book club and the teaching, and focused too much on Nafisi in the second half: **B**

Ron: I thought it was a remarkable book - took her experience and expertise in English literature and used it as a way to tell her story. The way this framework allowed her to share her story and her own situation was remarkable. But tough to get through the book, I found myself racing through the literature descriptions, looking for the kernels of interest such as the women's insight into life under the Islamic Republic, e.g., wearing the Burkah and interacting with the religious regime. Writing was very good, pleasant to read. I give it a **B+**

Keith: My high expectations, of a memoir by literata - with suppressed nubile women - were not met. The words I wrote to describe it: didactic, dilatory, dry, and disjointed: showed her own development as a high-falutin' literary critic. She dropped the women at the end (similar to lives at end of *The Perfect Storm*) and just left me hanging. I give her a **C**.

Mike: I was amazed that the two hotbeds of revolutionary thought and action in this book were Tehran, and Norman, Oklahoma! And most interesting the "Keystone Kops" enforcement of the laws within the Islamic Republic, where you could hide your satellite dish and buy western books with little interference. What a paradigm shift! For me, the two most interesting parts of this book were the discourse on Lolita as an oppressed female which certainly gave me more insight (along with the quote from Vera Nabokov), and the trial on the novel *The Great Gatsby*. Other than that, the final two of the four sections of the book appeared forced. **B**

Joel: This was a hard read: a lot of pages I had to go over more than once. I'll have to read Jane Austen - but my wife agrees with Nafisi: Austen paints the fathers as inept, mothers as social-climbing airheads. The enthusiasm for literature among the Iranian students was amazing. The banality of evil: government was capable of doing great harm - people were picked up for no reason, imprisoned, perhaps shot or "disappeared." Even under a missile attack, life went on - and the people were sending kids off to be martyrs. Amazing book: **A**

Post Scripts:

1] *Article Headline:* "Reigning dissident refused to sign relations report" - actually, Nafisi claimed she had not read this report making the case for US to attack Iraq, thus did not feel she wanted to take sides/sign.

2] No one brought up during the meeting about how such experiments as that of the Islamic Republic are wonderful arguments for the separation of church and state.

From the missing members:

Well gang I either screwed up or this is an initiation for the new member. I took the instructions given (near 2nd and Claremont) and looked at the Website which also said at 2nd and Claremont and showed the red dot on

the Mapquest map as at 2nd and Claremont. So I went to 2nd and Claremont and didn't see the RRR Museum. I drove around for 10 minutes or so and asked several people (two thought I was looking for drugs) but no one had ever heard of the Museum. I went into Pastian's Bakery (a block north) and again none of the 4 people inside knew where it was (and no phone number was listed in either the White pages or the Yellow pages under Museums). At this point I threw in the towel but, given that I was in Pastians and my anticipatory dessert juices were flowing, I bought several desserts to soothe the stomach. Unfortunately none of the 4 people in Pastians wanted to discuss *Reading Lolita in Tehran*.

As for the book, my comments follow:

Although the book seemed long-winded at times (especially in the early sections), I found it quite a bit more interesting when discussing life in Iran. Given the 350 pages I would have hoped to learn more about life in Iran and more about the author's background. I was somewhat frustrated by the lack of continuity in the story-line and the sometimes awkward paragraph structure. Many of the book discussions (*Lolita*, *Great Gatsby*) reminded me of lit classes I had taken decades ago when I hadn't read the book being discussed, couldn't really understand the teachers' lectures and would therefore crouch down in the back of the class so the teacher wouldn't call on me. In fact I haven't read *Lolita* and it is definitely a mistake to read this book before reading *Lolita* since much of *Lolita's* plot is divulged. Thankfully my short-term memory has degraded to the point that I'll be able to read *Lolita* in the not-too-distant future without recalling what was in fact divulged. Overall I found the book boring at times, yet there were so many interesting passages and anecdotes, that I still felt it was a good read. **B+**

- Ken

Hi Mike,

<My wife> Susan brought "*The Book Club Cook Book*" to her meeting (The Springfield Book Club). The ladies were most excited about the LTBC book mark with the 75 top books. Of course they did not realize that they were the top 75 macho books. They wanted to copy the list, but Susan suggested the LTBC web site for a more readable copy.

The group did not want to read "*Reading Lolita in Tehran*" because one member did not like "*Lolita*." That is the trouble with the ladies book club, they seem to require unanimous approval for any selection. The men each pick a book of their choosing for our book club. Otherwise you get into a majority dictatorship and never try anything unusual.

"*Reading Lolita..*" is an interesting book with feminist perspective. Our Men's club has to read macho books and prove our independence from the feminist dominated Springfield Book Club. It was great to attend the July meeting with you and share the discussion of *Franklin*.

Tomorrow we head to Alaska so I won't make the August meeting. "*Reading Lolita in Tehran*" is a very thought provoking book. Nafisi's descriptions of the Islamic revolution were so vivid and gave me a feeling for all revolutions. She clearly explained the mental struggles of herself and her students. She made me understand the feminist point of view better and showed how we can look at characters from different directions. I enjoyed

the quote from Nietzsche on page 180, about fighting monsters and looking into an abyss. We all fight monsters and look into abysses. The only complaint that I have is that after 290 pages, I have not mastered the list of her students. I wish that I had written comments about each student as they were introduced and discussed and would recommend doing so for any new reader of the book. I am looking forward to reading the last 50 pages on the way to Juneau. My grade for the book is **A**.

Best wishes,

- Gary

Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress by Dai Sijie - Sept 2004

Last Wednesday trumps First Debate

Apparently the Liberal Media wanted to disenfranchise the Last Thursday Book Club members of this Battleground State by sneaking in the First Presidential Debate right across our established nationally recognized time slot: Last Thursday, 30 Sept, 7 pm. Well, Bill Nelson did not let them get away with it. At least eight of us proved to be agile, mobile, and (at times) hostile. We eight stalwarts of the LTBC caucused pre-debate on Wednesday, yes, Wednesday - unfortunately, Ron B. could not attend, as he was at a "Free The Dixie Chicks" Rally.

The LTBC discussions strayed often from the topic, but for the most part stayed away from politics as Bill gallantly steered us back to China and the book. Bill states the book is reviewed in "The Book Club Cookbook" and that he and wife Randi enjoyed listening to it by "Books on Tape" reading, learning about life under Mao.

The translation by Ina Rilke resulted in her receiving the prize in 2002 for "best translation of French book."

We learned from Bill's map a smattering of the majestic sweep of history in China, to include:

- 5000 BC: farmers first grow rice along the Yangtze River - evidence later eaten.
- 220 BC: foundation laid for the Great Wall
- 219 BC: "squeeze" in play (Great Wall breached by paying off the guards)
- 2 AD: population of China already at 57 million people
- 584 AD: grand canal established, well before Joseph Smith in England - see "The Map..."
- 690 AD: rule by the only female ruler of China, well before Dixie Chicks
- 1086 AD: population now at 108 million

We also learned that Balzac lived from 1799 to 1850 and wrote 100 novels and short novels - before he was "immortalized" in the *Marian the Librarian* song in the musical, "The Music Man."

Two of our members in attendance (Ken and Don) have visited China, and both spoke of the Gen Joe Stillwell museum in Chungking and the nine airfields that the people built in 90 days.

When they finally focused, the LTBC members gave mixed reviews:

Ben: Liked it, interesting story, in a country we really don't know about. It was funny, yet sad. I was let down at the end, when Little Seamstress was off to the city to see what price she could obtain for women's beauty. **B+**

Ken: Really enjoyed it. The humor was reminiscent of Dave Barry, especially how the author would return to humorous themes like "I again played for them *Mozart is Thinking of Chairman Mao*." I learned a little about the country (I recommend visiting the Gen Joe Stillwell museum in Chungking.) The book was a fable more than a novel, and a novella: a great story but too short. Overall: **A-**

Rob: I probably should not read the dust jackets; this one said "Enchanting!" I kept waiting to be enchanted and it never happened. A thin book with a thin story. What made it a best seller? **C+**

Tom: Entertaining, but certainly not momentous. Read like a fairly simple fable. The climatic scenes leading to an abortion was odd - thin: **B-**

Mike: Some real similarities to *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, and some real differences. In a way, the two young men were being punished for the sins of their fathers. Interesting interplay between Luo and the narrator – making the narrator hesitant, shy, the geek of the two, made for an interesting duo, and then trio with the Little Seamstress. Quite a unique approach for a book about books. Excellent start – like so many books – with the village headman discoursing over the violin. I thought this would become a theme of the book, about the backwards culture and the superstitions of the farm people. Picked it up some with the drinking of the bull's blood, but was more a book about the age-old theme of boy meets girl, boy loses girl. The abortion search was most interesting – usually you have all these characters seducing the young women, and no one gets diseases, or gets pregnant. Here, it happened – and it was very clever plot twist to trade a book or two for the abortion. But strangely, it made you applaud abortion as the only way for the Little Seamstress to survive her culture. **B-**

Don: Character development was not well done. Most of my concerns have been mentioned (above). I got more out of last month's look at a totalitarian regime. **B-**

Joel: It was an entertaining book. Couldn't decide if it was a French book or a Chinese book. The engineer in me was reminded of Click and Clack reporting on Car Talk (NPR): "The French copy no one, and no one copies the French." The example is the Renault, with 3 lug nuts - won't fit on the standard tire stand. The book shows well how the culture has not changed that much: naked men still pulling chunks of coal by hand, with clothes off to keep them from getting filthy; and people boiling clothes for relief from a lice infestation. Fun, but less profound. **B**

Bill: Randi and I really enjoyed listening to it - humorous, fun to listen to and a quick read. I'll admit I was a little shocked when I saw how small/short a book it was in the hard copy form. The book opened my eyes to the Cultural Revolution. I will give a lesser grade to reading (**A-**) than to listening (A).

Note: The Club determined that a quorum would not be available for Pagosa Springs weekend of 16 Oct, and will request that Keith consider hosting at home on following Thursday (22 Oct).

From the missing members:

Dear LTBC:

Susan and I will represent you at the USAFA-USNA football game.

Dai Sijie's "*Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress*" is an enjoyable book. It is a charming story about a time of great catastrophe. The author has an enormous sense of humor and treated every anecdote in a light-hearted way. Perhaps it gives insight to how the oriental mind can deal with sorrow and hardship. Dai is somewhat like Nabokov in his ability to find humor everywhere even under extreme conditions. Dai's book is so much more cheerful than Nafisi's "*Reading Lolita in Tehran*." Both authors survive their revolutions and emigrate, but Dai does it laughing. Grade **A-**

We will be in Death Valley for the October meeting, but I am most of the way through "*An Invitation to a Beheading*." I'll be thinking of you and the beautiful Autumn in Pagosa.

Best wishes,
Gary

Dear Mike:

Sorry I will miss the book club meeting tonight. We're still back east. Should be home within the next 10 days.

I enjoyed *Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress*. Like *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, it provided some insight into life under a dictatorship, highlighting the strength of the human spirit and the universality of mankind. Additionally, like *Reading Lolita*, it seemed to end abruptly, giving the impression the story was unfinished, which may be as it should be. I give it a **B+**.

Looking forward to next month's meeting.

Jack

Invitation to a Beheading - by Vladimir Nabokov - Oct 2004

Kerry Activists Kidnap Kafka Fan

In an unprecedented move to convert voters, Kerry family cousins living on Parkside Circle in Southeast Albuquerque apparently swooped down on an unsuspecting member of the Last Thursday Book Club as he circled the bases in a vain attempt to reach sanctuary in the Luau Room of the Keith Gilbert Home and Roadrunner Wilderness Area. Some tap-tapping was heard throughout the evening, but Cincinnatus Ferrell was not sighted again - however, a mysterious cell-phone message was received from C-2. "By myself," said Jack. "What a silly boy," said M'sieur Gilbert. "Step back a little, gentlemen."

At that moment, little Emmie Genoni provided additional biographical background on V. Nabokov. The book, which does not exist in the Rio Grande Library System, was written in Russian, in Germany, in the 1930's. Was this a response to the Stalinist pogroms? or perhaps ...

Was not the book a Freud dream interpretation, queried Ben? Tom reminded

us that Nabokov hated Sigmund Freud - every one of his books is dedicated to his wife Vera, and almost every Foreword includes a thinly-veiled Freud slam - in this one he says of the book,

"It is a violin in a void... No clubwoman will thrill. The evil-minded will perceive in little Emmie a sister of little Lolita, and the disciples of the Viennese witch-doctor will snigger over it in their grotesque world of communal guilt ..."

For the record, Ben and Mike did indeed perceive in little Emmie the foreshadow of little Lolita. Ken noted that each Chapter was a new day, and the pencil reduced in length along with C's life. Easterling and Genoni saw the morphing of several characters, sometimes separate individuals, sometimes obviously the same: the director, Rodion the guard, the lawyer. Many of us enjoyed the humor - all the characters were clowns except for Cincinnatus ... and perhaps little Emmie.

Dang, I liked the down on her little arms ...

Joel: With apologies to Burkingetti - this book was a "*Devil's Island of the Mind*" (allusion to Ferlinghetti's "*A Coney Island of the Mind*," a seminal work of the hipster/beatnik era). An unpleasant book. I would rate it a **B-** but I would re-rate after I re-read. My impression now is unsatisfying, too surreal.

Rob: My standard for the surreal is *Bluefeather Fellini*. This book never made me stop and ponder the deeper meaning - and I did not want to dig it out. As a book, I didn't enjoy reading it a lot. **B-**

Ben: I kind of liked it - more like a dream - involving family he didn't like, another he didn't know, a wife he didn't trust. I liked it: **A-**

Tom: As an unabashed Nabokov groupie, this book struck a chord in me - but I like all of his books. I felt like I was going in and out of his dreams - when I finished the book, I wanted to read it again. **A**

Ron B: I couldn't really get into it, too surreal for me - didn't want to get too much into it. A period piece, art, but not my cup of tea - as a work as a whole, not that interesting. **C**

Ken: I'm a Nabokov virgin - I didn't know what to expect - but I would read something and kept going back, at times realizing something was beautifully written - "This is incredible!" - makes me want to read it again, and read what apparently is a classic for the Club, *Lolita*. **B+**

Mike: While reading the book, I thought of Patrick McGoochan in [The Prisoner](#) series, also quite surrealistic and dream-like, sometimes comical, and wondered if the series was inspired by this book. I really liked the humor in the book - the chess game where M'sieur Pierre is doing both the color commentary and the play by play is hilarious, like playing chess with one of your mouthy lawyer-like kids. The irony of thinking someone is tunneling to save C., and it turns out to be the only other inmate with the director - that was great. Having said that: overall, the book was not compelling for me, and I had trouble keeping up with the surreallism, of C-1 and C-2. **B**

Charlie: I give it a **B**, as the average of what I really thought of the book, and what I heard/appreciated from the discussion tonight. An excellent example of the value of our Club: I would not have read the book if not an LTBC selection, and I would not have appreciated it without our discussion. A much better book than I can appreciate.

Keith: I am unabashedly, irrationally mesmerized by Nabokov - a word genius. Every word is poetry, and like the notes in Mozart's music, not one word would I change. **A**

*Note: the question was raised during the meeting as to whether the translator, Dimitri Nabokov, lives on. Vladimir married Vera in 1925 and they had one child, Dimitri. Most intriguing is [this e-mail message](#) from Dimitri, praising Azar Nafisi's view of **Lolita**, which we read in our [August selection](#). So as of last year, Dimitri still lives, where his parents died, in Montreaux, Switzerland.*

<from our inactive reserve, 23 Oct 2004>:

Dear Readers,

The Red Sox still need to win four games this week to end the curse.

I enjoyed "*Invitation to a Beheading*." It is an allegory, a dream-like portrayal of life in a totalitarian state. The consideration shown to Cincinnatus by his keepers is bizarre and not typical of real treatment to prisoners or citizens. Perhaps Nabokov is ridiculing the power of the state. The weakness of Cincinnatus is symbolic of passive citizenry, whom Cincinnatus, the ideal citizen-farmer-soldier of ancient Rome overcame. Nabokov must be saying that oppressed people just need to decide to be free.

This is not my favorite Nabokov book. "*Lolita*" and "*Glory*" were better.

Grade **B+**

Wish I could be with you.

Gary

Dear Mike,

Sorry I missed the meeting. Was looking forward to the discussion and sharing in Ben's jubilation over the Red Sox win. Next time I'll use MapQuest or carpool.

Enjoyed the book and came to appreciate it even more after trying to deal with Presbyterian Healthcare and Tricare over a billing issue earlier in the day. That was then followed by my attempt to navigate in complete darkness through the polyhedron to Keith's house.

In any event, I agree with those who compare the world Nabokov describes in *Invitation to a Beheading* to the one Kafka's protagonist encounters in *The Trial*, in which the struggle for justice pits an individual against a baffling bureaucracy. Additionally, I saw parallels between *Invitation to a Beheading* and the last two books we read, where the liberating aspects of imagination played important roles.

A-

Hoping in November to make my way in that direction where, to judge by the voices, stand beings akin to me.

Jack

Eight dirty dogs sniffed their way into the beautiful White Oaks home of Host Ken. They came disheartened and reeking of turpitude but not yet in despair. With South African [Soetkoekies](#) awaiting the outcome, the soulless members "usurped upon a living thought that never more could be."

We learned that South Africa is the number three [murder capital of the world](#), behind Columbia (#1) and Swaziland (#2), the latter sharing a bloody border with #3. We learned that chasing [car-jackers](#) in Capetown is a two-person affair, with one as driver and one manning the machine gun. We heard that 7000 South Africans applied for amnesty after Nelson Mandela ascended into leadership, yet according to the [Final Report](#) of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, only 125 were granted. We felt much from this book by JM Coetzee, many themes, to include the redistribution of wealth, the battle for control by Arrogance and Eros, the question of whether apparent choices are actual choices, the deadening power of inertia. It evoked the helplessness of a Kafka (1883-1924, died of pneumonia) novel and evoked strong feelings from the members.

Jack: This book is hard to classify - a very powerful story - and very disturbing. It dealt with human relationships, yet the conclusion you come to is, "There is no higher life - this is the life and we live it with and like the animals." Yet I really enjoyed reading it. As one approaching/past middle age, I give it an **A**. Coetzee may have been born in Capetown, educated in Texas, and live in Australia, but he is a German cynic at heart.

Joel: Fascinating, but somewhat repelling - David violated the taboo between teachers and students - disturbing but fascinating. **A-** (my wife would not recommend this book to her club - found it horrid.)

Don: I'm afraid I just don't go with the rest of the crew. The book was thought provoking, so absorbing of everything. I think our lives ought to be different, this is not the way to look at life or let life treat us. Most of these characters had chances to improve their lives - but wouldn't do it. Couldn't do it? Baloney! I admire the man's ability to capture this story, but my heart goes down to the ground - goes down to the daughter, as she talks her father into staying out of her life. Too disturbing, not a valid piece of literature. B- or C+ ? **C+**

Tom: I think it was uplifting. I watched my sports team (*the San Francisco Bushbucks*) go down, and this book cheered me right up. It contained two stories: of South Africa, but also of mid-life crisis. Coetzee's writing, sentences were terse - different sentence structure than other writers - not so overly mechanical. **A-**

Mike: **D** is for *Disgrace*. **D** is for David and his daughter - for the dogs and the dying, and for the dying dogs. **D** is for despair, disheartening, desperation. **D** is for Desiree and desire. **D** may be indeed be a theme, but it is not a grade for this book. This is a book I will remember for some time. It taught me, it angered me, it frustrated me. Why did David go back and visit Melanie's parents? Did that make any sense? (It did make sense that he would surreptitiously watch Melanie in the play). David, David, why didst thou forsake the little dog, which, like Lord Byron had a club-foot, perhaps the only sentient being that enjoyed your opera? B+ or A- ? **A-**

Ben: Dismal story, with redemption at the end. David found a humbling purpose to his

life: clean up dogs. **A-**

Ron B: Well written book by a good author, but I would not want to read another of his books! Irony: easy reading, but not a simple book. I didn't understand the motivation of his daughter. David did have concern for his daughter. Her calling him "*David*" may have implied some difficult childhood issues. They still have issues - he could stay, but ... Not an uplifting book, but dealt with David's spiral down - he did get compassion for animals. I'd give it an **A:** well crafted, well written - hooks together all the themes of the book.

Keith: David was an aging Lothario, of waning magnetism. Short poem by Byron may be the lynchpin:

STANZAS FOR MUSIC

*There be none of Beauty's daughters
With a magic like thee;
And like music on the waters
Is thy sweet voice to me;*

*When, as if it sound were causing
The charmed oceans pausing,
The waves lie still and gleaming,
And the lulled winds seem dreaming;*

*And the midnight moon is weaving
Her bright chain o'er the deep;
Whose breast is gently heaving,
As an infant's asleep.*

*So the spirit bows before thee,
To listen and adore thee;
With a full but soft emotion,
Like the swell of summer's ocean.*

- Lord Byron

There was a strong ying and yang of David and his daughter: David was very rigid in his beliefs, his daughter was infinitely malleable, she would roll with the punches. Well written book, actual poetry in some cases. **B**

Ken: after reading Nabokov and Coetzee, I agree, both are well written. I enjoyed the book, so much action, so much happening. I had the feeling of the 52 year old: approaching the end of his career, he would never finish the opera. Pipe dream, like my own pipe dreams, things I won't get gone. I didn't like his visiting Isaacs. **A-**

Keith: There are two kinds of great novels - those that envelop you in warmth, comfort, a place you want to be, and those that create an uncomfortable place that you know you don't want to be in. *Disgrace* was the latter.

LTBC Write-in Reviews:

Please mark me traveling for Nov (Las Vegas) and Dec (Grand Canyon).

Disgrace was a shocking book, but one that was hard to put down. In short, Disgrace = dismay, dishonor, disheartening – two generations of dysfunctional in a disintegrating society. **B+**

Looking forward to attending your retirement party. Thanks for the invitation.

Have a good Thanksgiving and Christmas.

Bill Nelson

Dear Readers:

My review:

"*Disgrace*" is a very strange tragedy. David Lurie is the typical proud protagonist. His actions seem so foolish. Perhaps being able to anticipate the fall and decline of proud men makes tragedies so attractive to readers. The saga of Lucy is a greater puzzle to me. There seems to be little motivation for Lucy to remain on the farm. Coetzee uses Lucy to heighten the fall of David. He also uses Lucy to show how innocent people suffer in turmoil. David and Petrus are the principal villains. Petrus is cunning and successful. David is brilliant and short-sighted. The book raises a lot of questions about relationships and responsibilities. It makes us think about subjects that we like to avoid. Grade **A-**

Gary

Seven Pillars of Wisdom - A Triumph by TE Lawrence - Dec 2004

In the name of God the merciful, the loving-kind. We were nine in Wejh. And just before dawn, Auda said, "Let us make a raid upon Stalgren Ct. this Thursday at 7 pm." And we said, "in the name of God."

And we marched and we marched, and the land was barren, and we heard nothing.

And Auda said, "By God, you are right. We know not of the ancestry of Orens." And so it was told that El Orens was of Thomas Chapman, as the 2nd illegitimate son of this landed Englishman in Ireland, and the 2nd son of Sarah Lawrence, originally hired as governess of Thomas' four daughters. Thomas left his wife to live with Sarah; they moved to Wales and had a total of four sons. Lawrence spent a lengthy walking tour in Syria and Jordan, and later in his archaeology work, learned to work with the Arabs without the use of the British military.

... and the young Sheikh Kenny G. provided this link to David Fromkin's excellently written view of T.E. Lawrence and his life:

<http://www.newcriterion.com/archive/10/sept91/fromkin.htm>

David Fromkin is a Professor of History at Boston University and has written several books about the first World War and the Middle East ("*A Peace to End All Peace: Creating the Modern Middle East 1914-1922*").

And the stories told by the fire that night were plentiful and by the end of Thursday, by God, by my God, by very God, the sun rose upon us all.

Non *nobis Domine!*—

Not unto us, O Lord!

Joel: Fascinating book, slow to read. If I mapped battles, I could recreate the campaign. I would rate as an **A**. This is a significant book, if somewhat annoying.

Ron B.: I was annoyed right from the beginning. Preface by "T.E. Shaw" - who? Gave a list of all the chapters, which is good, but "*Seven Pillars*" as title, because he once wrote a book called "*Seven Pillars*" and liked the title? I had the feeling that Lawrence was bi-polar, or on too much caffeine. He writes what he wants. A significant book, not history so much as how the events strung together. Interesting, but was I learning anything or wasting my time? As a read (not historically) I give it a **B**.

Ken: Very mixed emotions. I found the first 50 pages or so very tedious and would have stopped reading except for my LTBC responsibilities. Good decision since the book began to become more interesting. It was hard to keep track of the characters and places since the new and mostly strange names kept pouring out page after page. The continuing detailed descriptions on the flora, fauna and landscape traversed in Lawrence's journeys became so boring that I started to skip over many such paragraphs after the first 100 pages. These omissions made the pages go by quicker and focused my attention on the more interesting story-line and anecdotes (e.g., "Feasting", Chapter XLVI). Lawrence's writing style is both elegant and sometimes difficult to understand perhaps due to differences between "British English" and "American English" or perhaps due to my failure to master either. With this ongoing handicap, I clearly look forward to the next LTBC selection (*Beowulf*). Grade: **B**

Keith: Not a book for the common man. A vomitorium of places - and I'm looking for decimal places. I learned a word: *midden* (refuse pile). I'm giving it a **C** just to get some dessert. The book is a classic but not for me.

Ben: I liked it better as I got into it - very British - Ken, you had trouble with all the people, but I had trouble with all the Wadis. The writing was very good, the descriptions of sickness were well done. **A-**

Jack: I fall somewhere in between Joel and Keith - a couple of insightful passages, but overall I found it very difficult, and I found it annoying. **C+**

Charlie: Very difficult to read, wasn't fun. It is an important book but I would not recommend it. But I'm glad I read it once. **B**

Tom: I finished the entire book, but did a disservice by pushing through the last half. I did find some of the sentence construction difficult, but going back over it found it elegant. Going back through it, I found interesting discussions of people. The battles worked to advance the storyline. The guy is brilliant, the writing is beautiful. The book could really improve from an editor's touch - today an editor would cut out one third. **B**

Rob: Just like *Magister Ludi*, I was captivated by this book. Provided insight into the British and Semite religious cultures. I floated over some of it. Lowell Thomas helped to publicize Lawrence. I checked out and watched the '62 movie last week, and I liked the book more - O'Toole gave Lawrence a dazed, confused look in the movie - the 'real' Lawrence was much more interesting. One example: the way he described the beating

in Naraa. **A**

Mike: When Malachy McCourt complained that he did not remember being anywhere as poor as described in *Angela's Ashes*, his brother Frank responded that the book was a memoir, not a history. Same is true of *Seven Pillars*, as Lawrence reminds us many times. This is a wonderful book, beautiful writing, humorous and clever anecdotes from a brilliant linguist and leader. I read this book 40 years ago, and never forgot its impact. I don't award an "A" lightly, and this is an **A** book.

LTBC Write-in Reviews:

Dear Readers,

"*Seven Pillars of Wisdom*" is an amazing book. T.E. Shaw's description of the manuscripts in the Preface makes you wonder how such a long book could be written with so much detail. As I reread the Introductory Chapter, I noticed that Lawrence said that he changed the names to protect identities. An Amazon reviewer wrote "It has been proven by historians (e.g. Lawrence James) that Lawrence not only embellished, but fabricated in toto his so called exploits, deprivations and exploitations in the Middle East." I do not endorse that review, but Lawrence's descriptions of so many incidents and so many locations were filled with enormous detail. I attributed these embellished descriptions to the similarity of places or perhaps repeated visits to places or repeated activities in camp.

I introduce the Amazon review to show other people thought that Lawrence could not remember so much detail. We had trouble today remembering what we did each day this week in Pasadena. Of course Lawrence was younger when he wrote the book than I am today. Maybe he had a photographic memory. He also went through a couple drafts. Each draft may have reinforced his recollection of facts, or reinforced his images of places and events. Sometimes people decide what must have occurred rather than remembering events. They reject their memories in favor of the logic of what should have occurred. Then their memories adopt the logical sequence of events. This is like the mind completing an image from eyes with blind spots from a nuclear detonation, laser injury, etc. Anyhow I liked the book and the beautiful writing and do not dispute the events or the history.

The book gives an insight into the Arab mind, behavior and culture. The Arab people living in the desert surely have not changed. I wonder how educated Arabs have changed, if at all. We all carry our cultural baggage with us through life. As far as the book goes, it is written almost poetically, with beautiful descriptions of places and events. If the book is not accurate, it is at least charming.

Unfortunately, it is long and difficult to read since the names and places are unfamiliar and numerous. I cannot read the maps, so I am confused with the locations. Overall I give the book a **B+** for the beautiful and different writing.

Gary
